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ABSTRACT

A composition activity designed to raise students' consciousness of sexually stereotyped language and to encourage exploration of assumptions about men, women, and language had three parts: students were given a list of ten concrete details about an activity commonly associated with men or women (backpacking, cooking hamburgers, and grocery shopping) and were asked to construct a narrative paragraph using the third person singular, the number of students who used male or female characters for each activity was counted and the results were distributed to the class for discussion, and the students wrote an expository essay using their notes from the first assignment and from the discussion. The assignment was given to writing classes at a university, at a community college, and at a trade-technical college. Results indicated that male characters predominated in the students' writings on all three activities but overwhelmingly so in the backpacking activity. In addition, it was found that different socioeconomic groups had different attitudes toward women. At the university eight of 35 students viewed the backpacker as female while at the community college only one of 10 did, and at the trade-technical college none of the 15 students did. The findings suggest that students from higher socioeconomic levels are more apt to encounter active, professional women than are students from lower levels and that minority women and men value those traditional roles that have been denied them. (TJ)

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COMBATting SEXIST ATTITUDES THROUGH WRITING

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Combatting Sexist Attitudes Through Writing*

Many people believe language merely reflects the attitudes prevalent in our society. If language is sexist and racist then society is sexist and racist. When society changes then language will reflect these changes. However, language and society have a symbiotic relationship, each affecting the other in subtle often imperceptible ways. The masculine and feminine stereotypes that pervade our society in books, in movies, and on television surround words with misleading connotations. Images of strong, assertive, active males in roles such as doctors and lawyers and images of weak, passive females in roles of secretaries and nurses influence our ideas and attitudes about gender differences, capabilities, and potentials. We indeed become imprisoned by our language which both reflects and at the same time influences the reality it supposedly designates and defines.

Feminists, seeing the discrepancy between language and reality, are actively seeking ways to change the sexist bias of words. Wilma Heidi of the National Organization of Women says, "In any social movement, when changes are effected, the language sooner or later reflects the change. Our approach is different. Instead of primarily noting the change, we are changing language patterns to actively effect the changes."¹

Consonant with Heidi's beliefs, we as instructors of writing are in a good position to encourage changes in society's attitudes toward women through the use of non-sexist language and literature. "Language transmits implicit values and behavior models to all those people who use it."² It falls upon those of us who teach others to use language, to seek role models and language structures that are relatively free from culturally bound stereotypes.

In the four years that I have been teaching in the women's program, I have been experimenting with various ways of assessing students' attitudes and of attempting to change those attitudes. A simple word association test clearly reveals that most students associate stereotyped emotions and activities with men and women.

One activity I have developed raises students' consciousness and then allows them to explore their assumptions regarding men, women, and language. The exercise has three parts. (1) The students are given a list of ten concrete details about an

¹Casey Miller and Kate Swift, Words and Women (New York: Doubleday, 1977), p. xi.

²Miller and Swift, p. xi.

*A paper presented at the CCCC meeting in Minneapolis, Minnesota April 4 to 7, 1979.

activity commonly associated with men or women and are asked to construct a narrative paragraph using the third person singular. This process is repeated on three different days with three different activities. The activities that I used were backpacking, cooking, and shopping. (See Appendix I for samples of the assignment) (2) I then computed the number of students who used male or female characters for each activity. I used separate categories for male and female students as I was curious to see if women were more likely to write about men than men were to write about women. I duplicated the results and distributed them to the students. They were instructed to jot down any thoughts that the statistics suggested. After about fifteen minutes, the class discussed their observations, many of them offering explanations for the results which clearly indicated that males dominated both the activities and the language. (3) In the third part of the activity, students turned their own notes and their notes from the discussion into an expository essay. (See Appendix II for a sample student essay.)

This activity proved effective in several ways. First, it allowed the students to discover for themselves the sexist bias of our society and our language. Second, it allowed them to generate ideas about which to write from their analyses and the discussion. Third, it gave them an opportunity to express their ideas in writing.

The assignment was given to writing classes at UCLA, Santa Monica College, and Trade-Technical College. The results revealed even more interesting results than were anticipated, that different socio/economic groups have different attitudes toward women. The student populations at the three colleges are very different. UCLA students come mostly from upper middle-class white families. The Santa Monica College students come from lower middle-class, white families. Those from Trade-Technical College come from low-class, black and Latin families.

The results of the assignment are shown in Tables 1, 2, and 3. As can be seen, male characters predominate in all three activities, but overwhelmingly so in the most physical activity--backpacking. Although it was anticipated that students would make backpackers male, it was surprising to see so many of them make cooks and shoppers male. This might indicate a greater flexibility for men breaking out of stereotypic roles than women. While students could not envision women hiking up mountains, they could imagine men cooking over a hot stove or pushing a shopping cart through the supermarket. (The choice of making hamburgers as a cooking activity was perhaps not the best choice as many men barbecue.) Another interesting fact is that women were more apt to write about men than men about women. Fifty-seven women made their character male while only eight men made their characters female.

Table 1. Male and Female Students' Choices of Narrators in the Backpacking Essay.

Choice of Narrator		
	Male Narrator	Female Narrator
Female Writer	24	7
Male Writer	27	2
$\chi^2 = 173.42$ ($p < .01$)		

Table 2. Male and Female Students' Choices of Narrators in the Making Hamburgers Essay.

Choice of Narrator		
	Male Narrator	Female Narrator
Female Writer	15	20
Male Writer	27	4
$\chi^2 = 91.76$ ($p < .01$)		

Table 3. Male and Female Students' Choices of Narrators in the Shopping Essay.

Choice of Narrator		
	Male Narrator	Female Narrator
Female Writer	8	6
Male Writer	5	2
$\chi^2 = 8.48$ ($p < .01$)		

A third interesting finding was the influence of socio/economic class on the choice of gender. At UCLA, eight of thirty-five students made the backpacker female, while at Santa Monica College one of ten did, and at Trade-Technical College not one of fifteen students made the backpacker female. It is probable that students from higher socio/economic levels are more apt to see active, professional women than students from the lower levels. In addition, we know that minority women and men value those traditional roles which have been denied them. Black women are trying to get into that same Doll's House that white women have slammed out of.

These findings are not startling; they merely confirm what we already know. Males are more a part of every aspect of our society than are females. And it is no wonder, for everywhere we turn we see and read about males. We are socialized from birth and throughout our lives to see men as positive, strong creatures.

This socialization is reinforced at school. The Feminist Press, since its beginning, has published alternatives to the sexist literature put out by other publishing firms hoping to influence the type of books being published. In 1976, they suspended publishing children's books to assess the impact their policies had had on traditional publishing houses. The findings of their research was bleak. In the 1977 catalogue of Parents' Magazine Press, there were only twelve titles out of hundreds listed under the heading "Role-Free Books for Boys and Girls." Sensing tokenism, they decided to survey what appeared to be non-sexist picture books published in the last five years using School Library Journal as a primary source. The 175 non-sexist books representing the output of 35 publishers in five years averages one book per publisher per year. Although the editors to whom the research team talked were sympathetic, their publishing policies were clearly guided by monetary concerns.

The research team concluded that "the world of children's books remains unquestionably a white, suburban, middleclass, nuclear family environment" where girls in "self-actualizing situations" are considered freaks who must constantly prove themselves and where boys are rarely seen as sensitive or tenderhearted.³

These kinds of stereotypes are perpetuated in higher educational levels. In the recently published The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction (1978) of the 91 stories only 22 were written by women and 21 had a female protagonist. Clearly, men dominate as both writers and characters. It is no wonder that students asked to write a story will write about a male character.

³Jeanne Bracken and Sharon Wigutoff, "Sugar and Spice: That's What Children's Books Are Still Made of," Women's Studies Newsletter, 5 (Summer 1977), 18-19.

There is a definite need for students to be given opportunities to both read and write about women in positive, active roles. Anthologies used in English classes should reflect women and men in diverse roles, and writing assignments should be designed to encourage students to write about both men and women in human rather than sexist roles.

It is imperative that we as instructors of writing seek ways, through writing and reading assignments, first, to make students aware of societal stereotypes and second, to attempt to change these stereotypes.

Rae Jeane Popham
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Appendix I

The Backpacking Essay: Using at least seven of the following clusters of details, write a short essay telling the story of an incident. Use the third person singular (he or she).

1. a 25-pound backpack bulging with food and clothing for a 3-day trip to the west slope of the Sierra Nevada Mountains
2. lifting the backpack out of the trunk of a 1975 Chevy Nova
3. a hiker wearing brown corduroy pants for protection against scratches, insect bites, and the weather
4. 2 pairs of socks under high-topped, heavy, sturdy boots
5. the pack gets heavier the further up the 2-mile trail the hiker gets
6. the sun feels hot--dripping perspiration stopped by the hiker's neck scarf
7. the sound of gravel crunching under boots
8. tripping over stones in the path
9. trying to balance on a log to walk over a stream
10. falling into cold, rushing water

The Making Hamburger Essay: Using at least seven of the following clusters of details, write a short essay telling the story of an incident. Use the third person singular (he or she).

1. the cold, slightly greasy feel of raw hamburger meat as it is shaped into patties
2. mustard, relish, ketchup, and not enough mayonnaise
3. large, soft hamburger buns with sesame seeds on top
4. eyes tearing from onions
5. the spicy, garlic smell of dill pickles
6. the sound of a running faucet as lettuce and tomatoes are being washed
7. the buzz of an electric can opener as a can of olives is being opened
8. smoke oozing out from the broiler
9. the smell of burning hamburger meat

The Shopping Essay: Using at least seven of the following clusters of details, write a short essay telling the story of an incident. Use the third person singular (he or she).

1. crunching of carts as they are pulled apart
2. cart with squeaking, misaligned wheel
3. the smell of barbequed chicken on the take-out rack
4. the smell of freshly-baked sourdough bread in the bakery
5. lettuce dripping with water
6. the sticky feel of waxed cucumber
7. the zip of a plastic bag as it is torn from a dispenser
8. the slightly sour taste of a grape from a not quite yet ripe cluster
9. a screaming child sitting in a shopping cart pulls a can from the middle of a Campbell's soup display and all the cans clatter to the floor.
10. the strong odor of peanutbutter from a broken jar of Laura Scudder's Crunchy Peanutbutter in the aisle

Appendix II

Sample Student Essay: Changing Attitudes in Society

To begin with, there are distinct anatomical and biological differences between the particular genders in the species of Homo Sapien. These differences have been accentuated throughout history (especially prehistory) usually in the form of a work division. A modern theory regarding prehistoric life was that since the female had the responsibility of bearing and weaning children, the male was therefore freed to procur food for the family. It was contended that before the desire to procreate was fulfilled, the necessity for nourishment had to be dealt with. It is for this reason that men, they who provided food, came into the position of judge and decision maker within the cave. Moreover, women, they who prepared the food, suffered by their reduced control of activities outside the cave, and therefore assumed control inside.

However, in today's age of technclogy it is not necessary to go out into the forest and wrestle a living out of the bush. Our system depends more and more on intellectual decisions such as: determining the best bargain at the supermarket and choosing the fastest lane on the freeway. Gone is the need to be physically strong and durable.

Even with this new "age" idea of equal intellectual life between the sexes, the past conventions have kept a rigorous hold on our attitudes today. The once colosally strong food provider has become the food provider in another sense. He now uses his intellectual strength to bring home the bucks, i.e. the beast. And when institutions of higher learning arose, the male was nominated to attend while his female couterpart stayed at home with the children where it was thought that she had an inherent talent in these matters.

Virtually two thousand years went by between the first academy's inception to the first woman's admittance to a university. However, now women are becoming associated with the patriarchal bread-winner and hence equal to men in all respects. However, the emotional and most necessary aspect of women's equality has failed to be realised by the masses. The only thing that keeps this archaic emotion alive is the simple fact of conditioned learning. From infancy we are taught that there is a distinction between mommy's and daddy's roles. We are raised exclusively by our mother while our father mysteriously earns the family's living "at the office." Also, we are divided from the opposite sex in childhood activity. The young males learn the art of sports--an art that will toughen their minds and bodies to the rigors of being a breadwinner. The young females learn to sew and mend clothes, and even care for younger siblings in an effort to train them for wifehood.

At this stage in history there is no reason why the female can't cast aside her conventionalized chains and join the male in determining how society thinks of her. The struggle for equality is hard; the age old traditions have to be put aside, as well as pride and prejudice. But finally, I think that not only men, but also women have to realise that they have been socialized to believe these old assumptions, and that only if they work together can they become truly equal.

Andrew Hadel